

English Interest in the Abolition of the Slave Trade

by Evalyn Ragsdale

1912

Submitted to the Department of History of the
University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

ENGLISH INTEREST IN
THE ABOLITION OF THE
SLAVE TRADE

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*Approved
Aug 7, 1912
C. O. Gardner*

*10 lines
6 lines in Spring Term
4 " in Summer Session*

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Chapter I.

yan Edwards
II, 44

The regular traffic in slaves from the coast of Africa was established in 1564. At first companies were chartered by the English Government but in 1698 private merchants were admitted to the hitherto monopoly. By the Assiento Contract, which was a part of the Treaty of Utrecht, March 31, 1713, the British Government secured for its subjects an absolute monopoly of the supply of slaves to the Spanish colonies for thirty years. The monopoly was granted at that time to the South Sea Company. They paid the King \$200,000.00 and were allowed to take no less than \$4,800.00 per year. From that time on the maintenance and the extension of the slave trade to the Spanish dominions and her own colonies became the central object of English policy.

cky II, 13.

port to
ria. 1832
II, 1019

Between the years 1663 and 1778 fifteen acts were passed by Parliament affording encouragement and protection to the sugar colonies. From 1664 to 1713 ten acts were passed respecting the slave trade, stating that it was necessary for the prosperity of the West Indian possessions. In addition four acts were

passed, 1732 to 1821, encouraging loans to the proprietors of the West Indian Colonies from British subjects and also foreigners. In 1760 when South Carolina and several of the other colonies passed laws restricting importation of slaves, the mother country refused to validate them. Again in 1765 and 1774 similar laws were rejected from the same colonies. In 1774, when the matter was under consideration, the Earl of Dartmouth, President of the Board, said: "We cannot allow the colonies to check or discourage in any degree a traffic so beneficial to the nation". The slave trade was considered by the public to be of an immense benefit to England as a nursery for her seamen, as well as profitable to the merchants as a trade. Moreover, the West Indian Colonies were being aided. The prosperity of these colonies was important to Great Britain because of their trade. Burke estimated the value of the imports and exports to these colonies to be between seven and eight millions or about one-eighth of the whole tonnage of the British trade. Besides supplying her own colonies, Great Britain supplied the other sugar colonies with slaves. By far the greater amount of the slaves was in British vessels. In 1768 out of a total of 97,000 slaves exported from Africa the British alone carried 60,000.

When William Pitt, the younger, became Prime

ort 1832
II, 1191.

rkson
II, 277

Minister in 1784, he advocated, among other reforms, the abolition of the slave trade as a moral duty. He recommended the cause ^{to} of Wilberforce, who was his friend and a wealthy and influential member of Parliament. Wilberforce did take up the work, and in 1787 became a member of a private committee, formed under the leadership of Granville Sharp, for the abolition of the trade. In 1788 Pitt himself introduced a motion for abolition. This motion was apposed by members from Liverpool, which was the chief port from which the slave trade was carried on. They argued that if England would relinquish the trade France would get it. Thomas Clarkson gathered evidence concerning the horrors of the trade. Only fifty out of every hundred taken from Africa ever became effective labourers. The other fifty died, either during the passage on the slave ship due to crowding and lack of water, or after the arrival in the West Indies due to hard labor and change of climate. He also showed the effect of the trade upon British seamen. More died in the service of slavers in one year than in the remaining trade for two years. The muster rolls of slave vessels showed that one-fifth died in service exclusive of those who perished when discharged in the West Indies. These statistics refuted the old argument in favor of the trade, that is, that it was a nursery for the British seamen. It was the opinion of Pitt and others, that if the

Clarkson
II, 52

Lecky VI,
288.

trade were abolished colonial slavery would lose its worst characteristics and at the same time be self-supporting. If family life were maintained in the colonies, the simple increase would make slave trade unnecessary.

ky V,64.

During the French Revolution the Jacobins took up the cause of abolition in France. Their support brought disfavor to the cause in England. In addition, the insurrection in St. Domingo had already cooled public feeling for the slaves. Pitt did not abandon the cause entirely, but his zeal declined and he never made it one on which his ministry depended. From the beginning of the war the complete naval ascendancy of England destroyed the slave trade to the French and Dutch colonies. When these colonies passed into the possession of England, the question arose whether the slave trade should be allowed to survive. Pitt could have prevented the renewal of the trade by an Order in Council, but he refused because it was a political and commercial object to strengthen these new acquisitions. As they had so long been prevented from supplying themselves with negroes they were ready to take more than usual. Consequently, under shelter of the British flag the slave trade became more active than ever. Wilberforce said in January 1802, "The slave trade has been carried on, especially of late years to a greater extent than at any former period of our history". During the years from 1798 to 1805, out of an

annual importation of 95,000 the British ships took 55,000 whereas, in 1788 the British had only taken 38,000 from the importation of 100,000. English capital was the means, moreover, of most of the rest.

cky V,65.

ate Papers
V, 541.

V, 541.

V, 559

In 1804 Wilberforce began his agitation again, encouraged by the presence in Parliament of some Irish members who were in favour of the suppression of the trade and of a few of the West Indian planters who feared the competition of the newly acquired islands which were being so rapidly restocked with slaves. On August 15, 1805 the first step was made by the English Government against the trade. An Order in Council was issued prohibiting the importation of slaves except in certain cases into any of the settlements, islands, colonies or plantations on the continent of America or in the West Indies, which have been surrendered to His Majesty's Arms during the present war and to prevent the fitting out of foreign slave ships from British ports. When Pitt died, Fox and Grenville carried on the movement. In 1806 an act was passed to prevent importation of slaves into any islands, colonies, plantations or territory belonging to any foreign state or power. March 25, 1807, a bill having passed both Houses received the Royal assent for the Abolition of the British slave trade. No vessel should be fitted out for carrying slaves and should sail from any port within the

British dominions after May 1, 1807 and no slaves should be landed in the British colonies after March 1, 1808.

CHAPTER II.

Immediately after abolition new difficulties arose. There was no abatement of the slave trade because the other countries, especially France and Portugal took up the trade that England relinquished. Hence, the supply to the other sugar colonies in the West Indies increased while that to the British colonies was legally cut off entirely. Moreover, British capital was invested to a great extent in that foreign slave trade. By this use of capital a slave might be purchased in Africa, carried to the West Indies and landed on the islands on which importation was permitted, for about £ 25. In the British colonies, where the importation was forbidden, the price of a slave was £ 100. The capital employed in the cultivation of the islands ^{returned} ~~was~~ about 10 per cent and there was a temptation to employ it in the prohibited slave traffic which yielded 40 per cent. The consequence was that a great deal of capital was employed in that way. By British capital all the Spanish, a great part of the Portuguese, and one-half the Danish slave trade was carried on. The imported slaves were in general unencumbered effective labourers, while in the British colonies where they were bred, a great part of the slave population consisted of old men, women and children none

Parlia. Deb.
31:557.
State Papers
VI, 26

Parlia. Deb.
31: 172.

Parlia. Deb.
2: 787.

of whom could work in the sugar fields. The English planter had about 34 effective labourers out of every 100 slaves, whereas their competitors could use 55 out of every 100 slaves. Labour was then four times cheaper in Cuba and other foreign sugar colonies and the profits four times as large, since sugar could be raised at so much less cost.

Parlia. Deb.
5: 1323.

The British colonies produced more sugar than the home market demanded. The surplus was sent to the continent where it met the cheap grown sugar of Cuba and Brazil and would sell for no more than it. The price of sugar had come down from 64 shillings per hundred weight to 24 shillings. After deducting the charge for conveyance only 15 shillings and 9 pence was left to cover the expense of the cultivation of the sugar.

State Papers
V. 571.

III, 975.

The effect in the colonies was either smuggling or distress. The Act of 1807 was habitually violated because the traders knew that if even one voyage in three was successful they were abundantly repaid for their losses. The English government made various attempts to stop the contraband trade. March 14, 1811 Parliament passed a bill making the carrying on of the slave traffic a felony punishable by an exile of 14 years or 5 years of hard labour. March 26, 1812 a Bill for the registration of slaves was passed to provide for the prevention

of illegal and clandestine importation of slaves.

V, 577.

May 27, 1814 an Act was passed to allow ships taken and condemned for being used in carrying on the slave trade, to be registered as British ships. The important events which agitated Europe 1811 to 1814 interfered with the efforts of the British government for the final abolition of the slave trade, but the fortune of war placed a great portion of the western coast of Africa under the immediate control of Great Britain and for a time the slave trade in those quarters was practically annihilated, but upon the reestablishment of peace the trade revived.

KXXIV, 227.

alia. Deb.
XVI, 14.

The only effective way to render aid to the colonies and to prevent smuggling was to induce the other nations to abolish the trade also. Agitation for such a measure was begun in Parliament in 1810 and negotiations were begun with all the important Powers with more or less success. March 3, 1813 a treaty was signed by Sweden. England ceded the island of Guadaloupe to Sweden and in return the King of Sweden forbade and prohibited the introduction of slaves from Africa, into that island and the other Swedish possessions of the West Indies. Swedish subjects were forbidden to engage in the trade. January 14, 1814, Denmark signed a treaty promising to cooperate with the British nation in suppressing the slave trade by prohibiting their subjects from engaging in that trade.

ate Papers
II, 886.

II, 886.

II, 889.

On June 15, the same year France, in an additional article to the definitive treaty of peace, wishing to oblige the English government, decreed that no vessel concerned in the slave trade should be admitted to Dutch ports and no slaves should be sold in Dutch colonies.

II, 890.

France, who thought the slave trade was necessary to the prosperity of her own colonies was not easily persuaded to make a treaty. A treaty was signed May 30, 1814 in which France united with Great Britain to induce all other Powers to abolish the trade. France promised to abolish it in her own colonies at the end of five years during which period no slave merchant should import or sell slaves except in the colonies of the state of which he was the subject. England was not satisfied with this treaty and negotiations were begun for another. August 6, 1814 Castlereagh wrote to the Duke of Wellington, who was

tate Papers
III, 892.

the diplomat at the French court, "If the French Government can be prevailed upon to confine the import of slaves to making good the deficiencies in the gangs required for the existing plantations, much would be gained. This might be regulated by licenses to the exclusion of import for breaking up and cultivating fresh grounds. In case of failure to gain absolute abolition, I am to direct your attention to the preventing of trade on the coast of Africa, north of

the Line, that is, the Equator. With the exception of some slight attempts by the Portugese at Whiddam on the Gold Coast, during the war the whole northwestern coast of Africa has been freed from the traffic. To prevent illicit trading vessels should be seizable when found with slaves on board within a certain distance of the coast named. Reciprocal admission to visit merchant ships of the other Powers should be granted. Such ships should be condemned in Courts of Admiralty of the country to which the ships belonged. The proceeds should be divided between that State and the captors". Such demands as these England was making upon the governments who were still engaged in the slave trade. In return for immediate abolition by France, England was willing to cede either a sum of money or an island in the West Indies as compensation for the losses sustained by immediate abolition. But France did not look upon it with favor.

III,907.

III,921.

On August 28, 1814 Spain signed a treaty in which His Catholic Majesty promised to prohibit His subjects from engaging in the slave trade for the purpose of supplying any islands excepting those appertaining to Spain, and promised to prevent the protection of Spanish flag being given to foreigners who engaged in that traffic whether subject of His Britannic Majesty or any other State or Power. Upon the condition that Spain would promise to

III,925

Castlereagh
to Wellesley

abolish the trade in five years confining it in the meantime to the coast south of the Line and agreeing to the common system for reciprocally enforcing the same, England promised further installments of subsidy. If immediate abolition was agreed to England would immediately give a loan of \$10,000,000., Spanish dollars. But Spain

III,921.

objected to these conditions because the proportion of the population in the Spanish West Indies was one negro to seven whites, whereas, in the British colonies, the proportion was twenty negroes to one European. The British government had taken twenty years to abolish the slave trade and should not expect the Spanish government to do it immediately.

III,931.

Moreover, Spain feared to give additional cause for discontent in the rebellious South American colonies.

Hertslet
I

December 14, 1814, the United States and England

State Papers
III,971.

in the Peace of Ghent bound themselves mutually to do all within their power to extinguish the traffic. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815 England succeeded in getting a declaration of the eight important Powers represented there, stating that the slave trade was odious to civilization and should be suppressed as soon as possible and the subject of universal abolition should come up later for negotiations between the several Powers. January 22, 1815, Portugal signed a treaty promising not to purchase slaves or carry on the slave trade north of the Equator. England paid

III,937

£300,000 as compensation. Finally Spain was induced,

IV, 33

September 23, 1817, to sign a treaty prohibiting subjects from carrying on the slave trade for supplying islands other than Spanish and preventing protection of the Spanish flag to foreigners engaged in the traffic. Furthermore, slave trade was to be abolished thruout the entire dominions of Spain on May 20, 1820; subjects were not to carry on the trade north of the Equator any more. As compensation England was to pay by February 1818, £400,000 to Spain for losses incurred by the treaty. When Spain was induced to abolish the trade then no slave trade would be lawful but that south of the line between South Africa and Brazil. No slave trader could navigate any part of the Atlantic north of the Equator, so that the risk of smuggling into the West India islands would be greatly lessened. As it had been, it was impossible to prevent smuggling when ships might lawfully pass from Africa to

X,96

Cuba, especially since the profit of a voyage was 300 per cent
/with small risk. It was possible to make two or three

IV,127.

voyages every year. The correspondence of the Naval Officers with the British Government in regard to the slave trade during the years 1816 and 1817 indicated that while in all probability fewer Africans had been enslaved since the Abolition Acts, yet the trade was transferred to the vessels of Spain and Portugal whose trade in slaves

had wonderfully increased. That fact produced a British Order in Council July 11, 1817, relative to the disposal of and the payment and distribution of bounties for captured slaves.

VI, 21.

At the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle 1818, Castlereagh asked the other Powers to unite in writing a letter to Portugal requesting her, as the only Power which had not a time fixed for abolition of the slave trade, to fix the time for such abolition. The year 1820 would be a very satisfactory one and no year later than 1823 would be satisfactory at all.

The other nations complied with the request of Castlereagh.

But to add to the trouble Spain and Portugal did not keep

the treaties they did make. It was reported in Parliament

1831 that the non-observance of foreign powers of these

slave trade treaties enabled the foreign sugar producer

not only to compete with the home market but to take into

the foreign market sugar at so low a price that the British

West Indian sugar grower was totally ruined by this competition.

The English Parliament passed an act May 28, 1818

to carry into execution a treaty made between His Majesty

and the King of Spain for preventing traffic in slaves and

another act on June 5 to carry into execution the treaty

made with Portugal for same traffic. At the Congress of

Verona, 1822, Mr. Canning urged the Powers that they prohibit

the consumption in their territories of the colonial

Parlia. Deb.
7: 728.

State Papers
V, 656.

Parlia. Deb.
6: 1331.

produce of those Powers which still continued to carry on the trade. This prohibition formed the subject of a renewed declaration on the part of Austria, Russia, and

State Papers Prussia. November 6, 1824 in a treaty with England, the
XII, 3.

King of Norway and Sweden granted the reciprocal right of search as a means for suppressing the trade. In

XIV, 609. 1826 Brazil promised to abolish the trade after three years.

Committees of investigation concerning the slave trade and the conditions of the West Indian islands, were appointed at different times. His Majesty's Committee reported from Havanna on January 2, 1832 that "it was undeniably true that the facility with which the Cuban planter can supply himself with negroes and the impunity with which he can overwork them, are among the serious sources of depression of the West Indies islands". This depression of these colonies increased the price of sugar. If Cuba and Brazil were allowed to get a monopoly of sugar, as it seemed they would, unless something was done to prevent, they would raise the price. But if the slave trade could be checked then the growth of sugar in those colonies would not increase.

State Papers
XX, 157.

Parlia. Deb.
77: 1139

Report 1848
I, 192.

In 1837 the Equipment Act was passed. This gave the British officers the power to take vessels which were equipped for slave trading whether they had any slaves on

Report
1848, I, 14.

board or not. Spain allowed an article to the same effect to be inserted in a treaty with the result of nearly destroying the trade under the Spanish flag. In 1839 a similar treaty enabled British cruisers to search Portuguese vessels suspected of the trade and to capture them if found with either slaves or equipment and empowered the British courts of Vice-Admiralty to condemn them.

State Papers
X, 91.

In all her negotiations with other countries for the abolition of the slave trade, England always emphasized the horrors of the trade, the disgrace to humanity, and her own generosity in taking the lead in the movement and in sparing neither effort nor money to induce the other nations to follow her example. Secretary Canning in October 1822 flatly denied the "nation inculcated by other Powers having colonies, that self interest now mingled with England's humanity and that by her persevering efforts to bring about the abolition in those countries she was only seeking to inflict upon the colonial possessions of her rivals a portion of the evils which the partial abolition was alleged to have brought upon her own". Nevertheless the "nation" was undoubtedly true and England would not have been so zealous for abolition in those other countries had they not taken up the trade she had laid down.

Parlia. Deb.
97:971.

The decrease of sugar production in the British colonies during the years between 1831 and 1846 was about

one-half. In 1831 the amount of sugar was over 4 million hundred-weight, in 1846 it was only 2 million. In 1847 a select committee was appointed to inquire into the causes of that decrease. Their report brought up the old question of the slave trade and the inability of the British colonies to compete with the slave colonies as long as they received fresh supplies from Africa. The Committee gave a comparative statement of the extent of the slave trade at different periods and the prices of sugar for the corresponding years.* This comparative statement shows conclusively that an increase in the number of slaves imported took place whenever the price of sugar was raised and a decrease in number whenever the price of sugar decreased. It could not be doubted that as long as there was a demand for slaves that demand would be supplied by some means or another, however vigilant the British squadron might be. Under any circumstances the West Indian

Report
1848, IV, 15

Report 1848
II, 81

NOTE:

Comparative Statement of Prices of Sugar and Number
of Slaves imported.

1820-1825	31s.		103,000	
1825-1830	34s. 6d.	9% rise.	125,000	21% increase
1830-1835	24s. 8d.	29% fall	78,000	37% decrease
1835-1840	29s. 3d.	19% rise	135,000	73% increase
1840	25s. 4d.	13% fall	64,114	53% decrease
1841-44	21s. 1d.	17% fall	45,665	29% "
1845-47	25s. 7d.	18% rise	65,743	44% increase

planter would be unable to compete with the Brazilian while the slave trade was permitted to continue. If placed on terms of perfect equality with regards to means of cultivation, however, there was nothing to prevent the British colonies from competing with any other colonies. But as conditions were now a 10 shilling protective duty would be necessary to enable them to withstand the competition. The Emancipation Act of 1833 made labour more in demand. British colonies and the change of policy of the British Government in 1846 in allowing entrance to its market of slave grown sugar raised the price of sugar, land, and slaves 15 per cent in Cuba. Consequently the slave trade gained a new impulse. Two methods of procedure for remedy were suggested by the report of this Committee, namely, to encourage free immigration and thus make slave trade unprofitable and to induce every nation to declare the slave trade piracy.

Report
1848, I, 116

Parlia. Deb.
109:1093.

In 1848 a petition was moved in Parliament to ask Her Majesty to direct negotiations to release Great Britain from maintaining armed vessels on the coast of Africa to suppress the traffic in slaves. The cost of this squadron was £706,454 annually. This together with the maintenance of captured negroes, of the bounty on those negroes, of the mixed courts and slave trade commissions, amounted to about £1,000,000 per year. But with all this expense yearly and the sums paid to gain foreign treaties England was not able to effectively put

down the slave trade. The only really effective measure which did finally put an end to the trade was the abolition of slavery itself in all the countries.

Chapter III.

The abolition of the slave trade by England did not lessen the evil since the trade was still carried on by other countries. Mr. Wilberforce, on account of old age, induced Sir Thomas [^]Fowell Buxton to undertake the anti-slavery cause in Parliament. Buxton began his work in 1821 but the slave owners were powerfully represented in Parliament and he achieved no success at all until 1823. At that time he introduced a motion for the gradual abolition of slavery. Mr. Canning amended the motion by introducing several resolutions for the amelioration of the condition of slaves in view of probable future abolition. These resolutions passed both Houses of Parliament and were recommended to the assemblies of the respective colonies for adoption. None of the colonies, however, adopted these resolutions because of the indignation of the planters at the interference of the mother country in their domestic affairs.

In 1833 Stanley succeeded to the colonial office and he brought in an Abolition Bill. There had been a growth
Parlia. Deb. of public opinion against slavery since the time of Burke, Fox,
17: 1193 and Wilberforce. The planters, by their obstinacy in not adopting the Resolutions of 1823, had lost the sympathy of many people in England by this defiance of the suggestions of the Mother

Walpole
III, 389.

country. The influence of the planters was reduced also by the fact that the trade with the colonies in 1833 amounted only to one-fifteenth part of the exported British produce, whereas, in 1814 after the peace, the trade had formed nearly one-sixth of the commerce of England. Slavery was beneficial directly solely to the planters but the slave trade was chiefly beneficial to the merchants in England. Consequently the opposition to the abolition of slavery was not so great as that against the trade. The abolition of slavery was expected to be a death blow to the trade and to smuggling. Mr.

Parlia. Deb.
I: 291.

Wilberforce had said long before this, "Something must be done to effect an entire reformation in the system, not merely with a view to justice and humanity, but also to sound policy; for, however, this country may be determined not to permit the recommencement of such a traffic, the temptation to renew it, which the deficiency of slaves would hold out, would be too much for human nature, at least human nature in the West Indies".

Parlia. Deb.
3: 1410

Since the slave population had decreased from 800,000 in 1807 to 700,000 in 1830 in spite of the smuggling, it was evident that slavery was not going to be self supporting and would be, therefore, in time an impossibility without being recruited by trade. The gradual decrease in numbers was lessening the total value of slaves and it was not such a task to give the planters compensation for the slaves on hand. The Earl Grey Ministry, a Whig reform ministry, carried the

Walpole
III, 407

Abolition Bill thru the Commons August 7, 1833. The Bill received Royal Assent August 28th. £20,000,000 was given as compensation. The Bill provided for freedom with apprenticeship; total freedom to take place by 1840. But by August, 1838 every slave in the British colonies was free.

Garrison
117.

During the rest of the nineteenth century slavery was abolished in the other countries. France freed the slaves in her colonies in 1848, the Netherlands in 1863, the United States in 1865, Spain in 1870 and Brazil in 1888. Through all these years the policy of England was to favor abolition. As an illustration: at the time of the annexation of Texas to the United States the Earl of Aberdeen made certain statements in the House of Lords which indicated that the abolition of slavery, not only in the republic of Texas but also through the whole of America, was a feature of British policy. The Earl, when asked by the American Minister concerning his statements, admitted the desire of Great Britain for such abolition and their policy of giving advice to that effect, but denied that the government had made the subject a matter of treaty stipulation with Texas.

The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 was the outcome of a humanitarian movement as was also the final abolition of slavery in 1833. Nevertheless, the English Government from the beginning to the end, was evidently cognizant of its best interest at every period. When it was to her interest as a nation to encourage the trade she did so. On the other hand,

when it was causing the ruin of her West Indian colonies she spared neither effort nor money to make abolition compulsory upon the other nations and especially upon those nations which had colonies competing with the British colonies. Likewise slavery was abolished at a time when it was not so profitable as it had once been. Palmerston replied, in answer to the question whether the abolition of the slave trade was, in his opinion, to British interest as well as duty, apart from the interest of humanity, "I think, generally speaking, with regard to national concerns, that, whatever is the duty of a country, is also its interest. Taking the more limited and narrow view of the matter, I certainly think, that as far as regards our West Indian colonies, a great injury will be done to them if the slave trade to Cuba and to Brazil were permitted to be carried on to the full possibility of its extent".

Report
1848, I, 18.

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